

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 73
Therese Giehse

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the DeadLadyShow Podcast! I'm Susan Stone.

The DeadLadyShow celebrates women, both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive.

And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage here in Berlin and beyond.

Then we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast.

In this episode, we're going to meet a woman who used her art to stand up and fight against the corrupt and deadly politics of her day, even as she was driven out of her home country.

Therese Giehse was a German actor, pacifist and exile, known for founding an anti-Nazi cabaret, which really we could all get behind these days.

She was a much admired favorite of playwright Bertolt Brecht, and she also acted in movies with Vivien Leigh and previous Dead Lady Show star Romy Schneider.

Dead Lady Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire has her story, recorded live on stage in Berlin.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We're going to start with a little bit of German, to see and hear Therese Giehse doing something she loved, performing Bertolt Brecht's song *Mutterbeimlein hat ein Holzbein*. It's a song about a woman with a wooden leg.

SONG CLIP:
Mutter Beimlein
Hat ein Holzbein
Damit kann sie ganz gut geh'n
Und mit 'nem Schuh und wenn wir brav sind
Dürfen wir das Holzbein seh'n!

In dem Bein da ist ein Nagel

Und da hängt'se den Hausschlüssel dran
Das sie ihn, wenn sie vom Wirtshaus heimkommt
Auch im Dunkeln finden kann!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There you go, it becomes more obscene as we go on.
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND APPLAUDS] So you can see, this is a woman who knows how to wear reading glasses, and has a really impressive stage presence.

Therese Giehse was an actor, very much admired. I was asking friends, German friends, and they were like, "Oh my God, I love her so much."

She worked incredibly hard for very many years. One of the things she did in later life was these evenings of Brecht songs and poems. After the war, her friend, the playwrights and director Brecht, worked mainly in East Berlin, Therese Giehse — and Therese Giehse mainly in Switzerland and West Germany.

This guy, whose name I've forgotten, comes all the way from East Germany to Munich where she lived, crossing an international border, as you probably know is a long way, to plan one of these Brecht evenings in Berlin. And he asks her how to set up the stage. She says:

Oh, just give me a tablecloth so people can't see my feet moving.

And where do you want the table?

In the middle, it doesn't really matter.

So, maybe to one side, slightly diagonal.

No, in the middle, straight.

And what kind of chair?

Just a chair.

Chair or armchair?

Not an armchair, a chair.

What kind?

Just a chair, a chair for sitting on. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

What title should we announce for the evening?

What do you mean title?

Brecht, that's all.

Just Brecht evening.

Therese Giehse was a straight speaker. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's a very choochy young Therese Gift, as she was actually born, Giehse was a stage name. She's got a lovely little smock and a bunch of flowers.

She was born in Munich in 1898 and was the youngest of five, by quite a long way. Her closest sibling was her sister, Irma, who was seven years older. They were a Jewish family. The father was a wholesaler of fabrics and haberdashery, but he died when Therese was 13. They lived opposite the synagogue.

They were fairly liberal, but not assimilated, so they didn't celebrate Christmas, for instance. She went to the local primary school, which being Munich, was Catholic, and was bullied there by anti-Semitic classmates and teachers. In her words, they told her, "I was fat and ginger and I'd killed Jesus." [AUDIENCE MURMURS] [SHOWS SLIDE]

So here's Therese around 1919. She's 21 in this photo. She looks significantly older and that was continued, she always looked older. We don't know what made her want to start acting. She did have an opera-singing second cousin, and the family lived very close to the theater in Munich, where she later worked for many years. She left school shortly afterward World War I began in 1914 and she stayed at home the four years of that war, which presumably was quite dull.

Her family wasn't convinced acting was for her. And they told her actresses had to be thin and beautiful and she wasn't. But, she was stubborn and she went to audition with an actor who sent her for training to this wonderful woman: Toni Wittels-Stury. Two years of acting lessons she took. She worked in a coal rations office to pay the fees.

Therese Giehse had a natural talent and a real gift for observation. But her teacher taught her to play roles she never ended up getting. She learned how to play waifish girls like Juliet and Ophelia.

She then spent five years at small regional theaters, playing mothers and nurses and governesses until 1925, when she got a gig here at the Munich

Schauspielhaus. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is a view from the stage. Imagine looking out on that very magnificent red and yellow stuff.

It was a very creative and critical environment, where Therese really learned her trade by watching other actors from the wings, and that was something she continued her whole career.

Here she is in 1925. [SHOWS SLIDE] It's almost straight out of the Bauhaus costume party, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] with a wonderful cone-head hat, with a silver stripe down the middle and a black tunic or something. She's in George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, which is partly set in the future.

So she acted in all sorts of different plays there, from classics to light comedies, usually playing certain roles, as I mentioned. So she was very, very successful, highly acclaimed even in young years.

But this wasn't happening in a vacuum. Munich is where Hitler attempted a putsch with General Ludendorff in 1923. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here they are, looking very proud of themselves in their really stupid uniforms. The putsch failed and Hitler ended up in prison. He was released after only nine months, having written large parts of *Mein Kampf* in his cell.

So actually, I didn't know, but the Bavarians liked the Nazis slightly less than other Germans after that. But the Nazis remained prominent in Munich.

Guess who was a big fan of Therese Giehse? Yes. Hitler was a regular at the theater and was a real admirer of Therese's motherly roles, as you can imagine. That was what he wanted women to be like. The Nazi Party newspaper wrote: At last a German woman in this Jewified theater." They worked it out soon enough.

But as Hermann Goering is said to have said, "I decide who's Jewish." And Hitler continued to admire her and offered her protection, that kind of thing.

Meanwhile, here's a much nicer picture. [SHOWS SLIDE]

These cool kids came into Therese's life. Does anyone know who that is in the middle? It's Annemarie Schwarzenbach, a big favorite at the Dead Ladies Show.

And on the left, you can see Erika Mann in a white dress with cigarette, and on the right, you can see her brother Klaus Mann in a white suit with cigarette, and at the back there's a gondolier because where else would they be but Venice in 1932. Yes. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So Therese first met the famous writer Thomas Mann in 1927 through her work in the theater, and then his kids. These were the two oldest. Erika admired Therese hugely. Erika was seven years younger.

Now, Therese was extremely, extremely discreet about her private life. But luckily for us, Erika was not, let's say, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and neither were Klaus or Annemarie.

So most of what we know about what happened next is from these three. So Erika and Therese became a couple after Erika left her first husband, Gustav Gründgens. We'll hear about him again. I don't think they were ever exclusive, but there you go.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So this is Erika in her fantastic Pierrot costume with her really excellent haircut as well. This is her father's favorite look of hers. I think she was very contemporary, actually. She had this famous dad. She was an excellent organizer and PR person. I think she would have absolutely adored social media. She was an actor, a writer, a passionate car driver, an anti-Nazi, and a fellow breaker of gender norms. And both Erika and Therese could be very direct.

So Therese was getting tired of acting, as she called it, “without emotional necessity” every night. She and Erika and Klaus wanted to make a political difference through their work. And they started a cabaret. It was called Die Pfeffermühle, the Pepper-Mill. They found a Munich venue and they wrote sketches. And Erika and Therese directed the whole show. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Here's the whole gang on the road. Bit later on, you can see Therese bundled up in a big coat with a nice warm collar and Erika in front of her kneeling on the floor.

What I don't want you to imagine, it was like the movie *Cabaret*. [SHOWS SLIDE] Although Therese did really, really admire Liza Minnelli in that role as Sally Bowles.

She said she's “so clever, she knows exactly what she's doing. Actors need to understand the situation and what the character would do in that situation.”

Therese wanted to make audiences think. She didn't want to make them happy.

So having seen Liza in her skimpy costume, bowler hat, [SHOWS SLIDE] here's Therese in one of her most famous parts in the Pepper-Mill, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] playing the role of Stupidity.

This black and white photo, the gray smock was pink apparently, and then she had this horrible dirty blonde wig. So it was political cabaret. There were lots of poems and songs, only a very small amount of dancing.

And the show opened on the 1st of January, 1933 with Therese dashing back and forth between the theater and the cabaret venue because she was doing both on one night. She was the absolute star. She brought in the crowds. And Erika was the very charismatic MC, like Susan tonight. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So these were highly politically charged times, as you can imagine, as the Nazis were rising to power. And the cabaret worked only with allusions and insinuations. They were very critical of the Nazis, but they never named names, or even the country they were referring to.

Therese had to flee Germany on the 13th of March 1933, so only just after the first season at the cabaret. She had called Hitler “a crazy owl” backstage. It sounds better in German, sorry. And she told a joke about the Reichstag fire, which I'm not even going to attempt to translate, it doesn't translate. It was funny in German, though. And she was denounced by one of her fellow actors. She left only with hand luggage mid-rehearsal. Erika was already in Switzerland and picked her up in the car on the border. [SHOWS SLIDE]

This photo is taken by Annemarie Schwarzenbach probably that same year. As you can see, Therese looks a little bit glum. She's giving somebody a really good side eye. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] We don't know who's off to the side.

Their prospects were indeed not great, especially since the Swiss authorities were not mad keen on refugees. The Mann kids and Annemarie and Therese did a lot of drugs in this period. They took two prescription meds called Eukodal and Benzedrine, which they called “tuna” and “fish”. And we know them now as morphine and amphetamine. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So the Pepper-Mill—many of the other actors joined them in exile and they toured Switzerland and Europe for a couple of years, playing to other exiles and German speakers in what's now Czech Republic, for example, to great acclaim. They were really, really very respected.

But they faced problems with their passports. Erika was put on a public list of people to be expatriated by the Nazis and Therese's passport would soon run out, leaving them both stateless, which nobody wants. So Erika married the British writer W.H. Auden, who you've probably heard of.

She knew him through Christopher Isherwood, who you probably also heard of. And Auden helped out Therese by matching her up with this handsome hat-wearer, the writer and carer John Hampson Simpson. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Auden thought it was gay men's task and duty to marry women to help them get British citizenship. He phrased it as, "What are buggers for?" [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Therese and John stayed friends for as long as he lived, and she'd visit him when the theaters closed for summer. My favorite fact about him is that he only ever wore brown. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So, there was a lot of pressure from the Nazis on the cabaret, including from Annemarie's influential Swiss family, which made touring the show more and more difficult. So in 1936, Erika decided to take the Pepper-Mill to the USA. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's the kind of crazy poster with a pepper mill, and some cool kids. It looks, I think it's really modern. I like it a lot. What I don't like is — it says *Erika Mann's Pepper-Mill*, because there were a few other people involved.

It went down very badly indeed, in the States. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] The Americans were expecting Liza Minnelli in advance, I guess. And that wasn't what they got. There were different expectations. And the actors, including Therese, actually didn't speak English well enough to really feel what they were saying. Erika and Therese rowed a lot. Therese got jealous. Erika was not very generous towards her at this time.

So she went back to Europe, where a telegram awaited her in February, 1937, offering her a job at the Schauspielhaus theater in Zürich. They stayed friends. Very good. She was very good at staying friends. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Here's the Schauspielhaus theater again from the stage, looking out on that very fancy interior. Must have been a little bit intimidating. It's not like here. Therese worked like absolutely crazy, that she would have rehearsals, premieres, performances, rehearsals, premieres, performances. Just—her diary was full all the time.

And the Schauspielhaus became a hub of anti-Nazi theater, employing German emigrants, largely Jewish and political refugees. Therese helped later arrivals to settle in, including her sister, Irma, who brought her dog, Daisy, with her. Therese had to pay a 10,000 francs guarantee to get her sister into the country, which was donated by a benefactor, because she could certainly not have paid it.

Her mother died in 1934, which she saw as a blessing later on. Her older sister died in 1941. One brother died in South American exile and one survived in Germany through a marriage to a non-Jewish wife. But Therese found him too

uncritical of Germany and broke off contact after the war. Her opera-singing second cousin was banned from the stage and died by suicide in 1941.

The Schauspielhaus soon became the only free German-language theatre in Europe. During the war, the German actors working there kept packed suitcases backstage. Here's the list of what Therese had in her rucksack:

Brown woolen scarf, woolen shirt, woolen trousers, three blouses, linen trousers, two cardigans, handkerchiefs, woolen socks, socks, two towels, two bras, two night shirts, three sets of underwear, stockings, soap, creams, bandages, scissors, knife, powder, washcloth, shoes, pajama trousers, corned beef, chocolate, boiled sweets, rusks, tea, coffee, dried fruit.

It sounds like a lot, but if that's all you have, it's not. I'm going to cheer up now.

1941 saw her in one of her biggest roles ever as Mother Courage. She was the first person ever to play the title role in the premiere of Brecht's anti-war play in Zurich. [SHOWS SLIDE]

You can see her here sitting with a basket over her shoulder on a covered wagon with a girl by her side, and it's pulled by two young men. So those are her children in the play. The choices she made in the role were continued by later actors, so she really built the role from the ground up.

It was very close to the bone, actually, as World War II was raging, to show a woman trying not to take sides and to profit from a past war and losing everything in the end. From 1939 to 1945, neutral Switzerland exported over 1 billion francs worth of weapons, munitions, fuses and military optics, including about 820 million francs worth to Germany, Italy and Romania, the fascist Axis powers.

The play is still staged today, and if you recognize who this is—Meryl Streep was in it this century, here's why Meryl took that same part.

MERYL STREEP IN INTERVIEW CLIP: You want to know why I wanted to do this play? It was not because of the scene where Katrina is brave and brings down the thing and alerts the villagers, because in my perverse reading of the play, I suddenly thought, you know what? An act of bravery is a thing that continues the carnage. She's going to wake them up, they're going to fight, it's the war that's going to go on. You know, it's like, ahh! The thing that I wanted to make it was because of the lullaby, was this scene that we see over and over and over and over on television, Lebanon everywhere, Srebrenica, women just going, "why?" over the body of their children. That's what it was. It's the whole

thing for me.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Therese did all sorts of fundraising events in Switzerland for refugee charities, and she played a Jewish refugee in the 1945 Swiss film *The Last Chance*, which won a Golden Globe a little bit later. I'm going to show you a little bit of that.

CLIP FROM THE LAST CHANCE:

THERESE GIEHSE: Look at us here now. Not more than two from the same country. And what do we know about each other?

MALE ACTOR: Not much, I admit.

THERESE GIEHSE: And still you agreed to help us?

MALE ACTOR: But only because that priest chap asked us to.

THERESE GIEHSE: But afterwards, when we found the guy, he was dead.

MALE ACTOR: Dead? Well, it's difficult to argue to the sound of gunfire, you know.

THERESE GIEHSE: Why don't you admit it? You helped us because you are decent people. Human. Human. (MUSIC FADES OUT)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There you go. That's a group of refugees trying to get into Switzerland across the mountains, which obviously really took place outside of the film as well. Postwar, Therese worked a lot more with Brecht and did more directing, including at Brecht's Berlin Ensemble around the corner from here in East Berlin.

She stayed in Zurich, but she also had a flat in Munich from 1949. [SHOWS SLIDE] And in 1950, this glamorous old friend turned up in her dressing room. This is actually from 1935, so she probably wasn't wearing that same silky top, but I like to imagine her hair was just as good. This is Marianne Hoppe, who had been a movie star under the Nazis and was another ex-wife of Gustav Gründgen's, like Erika.

They — yeah. It's hard to explain. So I won't. According to Hoppe, she and Therese were “overrun by feelings” in the dressing room. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Now, I mentioned she was discreet, right? So all I know is that in 1956, Marianne Hoppe moved into the flat downstairs from Therese, and in 1966, they went to

the Oktoberfest together. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Well, Therese was a really big Oktoberfest fan. She, you know, I think she missed going to it in exile, and she went every year after that.

So Therese would work at her theaters in Zurich and Munich and Berlin, and she would travel by train and plane between them with a small bag. And then in the holidays, she would visit friends, including her husband, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] watch other plays, watch other plays, and work in films.

So here she is, very excitingly, with Vivien Leigh in *Anna Karenina* in 1948, playing yet another housemaid, the kindly Marietta.

CLIP FROM ANNA KARENINA:

THERESE GIEHSE: Madame. Oh, Madame!

VIVIEN LEIGH: I've come to see Sergei. I asked his father, but I couldn't wait for the answer.

THERESE GIEHSE: Oh but...

VIVIEN LEIGH: Oh, but how is Sergei? Is he all right? How does he look? Is he eating well?

THERESE GIEHSE: Yes, and he's growing so fast.

VIVIEN LEIGH: How tall is he?

THERESE GIEHSE: He comes up to here.

VIVIEN LEIGH: Already? Yet I must see him. Let me in, no one will see

THERESE GIEHSE: Well, it isn't the same porter. And his excellency has guests.

VIVIEN LEIGH: Oh, but I must see him!

THERESE GIEHSE: And...that's not the worst. His excellency told us to say... you were dead! The guests are beginning to leave. Come tomorrow very early before his excellency is awake. I'll let you in.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, the camera really loved Vivien Leigh, and just for some reason...[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But you heard, you heard Therese speaking.

So, I also cannot fail in this environment to mention Therese's film with Romy Schneider, another beloved Dead Lady in this room, *Mädchen in Uniform* from 1958. [SHOWS SLIDE] It's based on the first play on female homosexuality in the Weimar Republic by Christa Winsloe, which incidentally was translated by another Dead Lady that we have presented here, obviously, Willa Muir—Kafka translator—under a pseudonym.

So, Romy is madly in love with her lady teacher at a strict girls' boarding school, but the cruel headmistress played by Therese is appalled. We get spiked drinks leading to drama, [SHOWS SLIDE] and then we get this redeeming sickbay scene with Romy looking angelic with her eyes closed, and Therese, she still looks a bit mean, but apparently she, I haven't watched it, but apparently she, it's all good at the end.

Therese worked closely with the Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. [SHOWS SLIDE] She was the first person to play the vengeant wronged Claire Zachanassian in the 1956 premiere of *The Visit*, which I had to read at the high school. Tony Kushner did an adaptation in May 2020. So that's her on the left doing that one. She's like a millionaire, a multimillionaire, and she has all these strings and pearls and a cigarette holder. And on the right you can see her in Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*.

So in 1961 she read the script, they were pals, and she told him that the character Dr. von Zahnd was not only the most difficult to pronounce, but also the most interesting. And Dürrenmatt promptly rewrote the play to make the doctor a woman, played by Therese, looking very medicinal in this photo.

So in the late 60s, West German theatre really rejuvenated itself with younger directors, and Therese loved to work with them. [SHOWS SLIDE]

And here she is playing another mother in Brecht's play *The Mother*, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] staged by young revolutionaries at West Berlin's Schaubühne. It's 1970, she's 72, she's still using all her skills, even though remembering scripts wasn't ever her greatest strength.

[SHOWS SLIDE] And I really love this soup bowl scene. You can really see her embodying this fast and hungry eater and lifting up the bowl, tipping it out into the spoon together at the very last drop out of it.

She enjoyed working with the young radicals, although she did keep out of the very long political discussions that the collective had.

In 1968, she read pacifist Brecht texts at public protests against the Vietnam War.

And in 1973, this is one of my favorites, she signed a petition against the cancellation of a play at the Munich Youth Theatre, which was about terrible working conditions for apprentices. She signed it with “Therese Giehse, apprentice, 75 years old.”

And in fact, she was always willing to learn and watch and hone her craft. [SHOWS SLIDE] Germans seem to know her from this award-winning nine-part TV series, *Münchener Geschichten*, Munich Stories from 1974, where she plays a pithy Jewish grandma battling against gentrification and putting up with her tear-away grandson. You can see that she looks a bit down in the dumps again, here doesn't she.

But in the background, you can see her grandson, Charlie, in his very on-brand from 1974, stars-and-stripes VW Bus. I tried to watch it, but I could not understand a word they were saying in weird Bavarian dialect from 1974.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is a painting by Günther Rittner from 1966, depicting her as Mother Courage.

Therese Giehse died in 1975 and was buried with her sister Irma in Zurich as she wanted. She was a fiercely independent woman who fought back against tyranny and war.

She was fiercely perspective of her private sphere in a time when gay men could be prosecuted, and in fact that time continued until 1994 in Germany, and when lesbians were simply silenced out of public existence.

She needed distance for her emotional equilibrium, but I don't think she was really alone, as her biographers seem to stress. She really deeply understood people. She had them around her all the time at her work, and that is what made her an extremely talented and extremely influential actor, and she had a wicked sense of humor.

I'm going to end with a little clip from her last film, *Black Moon*, directed by Louis Malle and co-starring Cathryn Harris.

So just to summarize the plot—it's a great film, do watch it. It's on the Criterion Channel. But if you like a plot-led film, hmm. So, escaping a war between men and women, Lily, this young woman, has sought refuge in a strange house where she finds an unnamed old woman, played by Therese, communicating

with the outside world from her bed by radio.

Therese is 75 at the time and she does all the acting from the bed. It's just, I think it's a really great illustration of her hard work and her talent, obviously, and maybe also her sense of humor and directness.

I'm sparing you the parts where she talks in rat language to her giant rat pet, Humphrey, and we'll just finish with this:

CLIP FROM BLACK MOON:

THERESE GIEHSE: What? What does she look like?

Her hair? Blonde.

Stringy. Looks dirty, probably never washes it.

Eyes blue. Big blue eyes.

I think she's really very stupid, yes. She looks stupid.

She's a stupid girl, yes.

Her nose has no character. A pug nose.

The mouth is too tiny, narrow mouth.

Legs are all right.

Bosom? She has no bosom. [LAUGHS] No bosom at all!

CATHRYN HARRIS: You're very rude.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There you go. Therese Giehse. Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire on Therese Giehse. Thank you, Katy, and thank you to Betty Kapun for recording our event, and thanks also to Thomas Beckmann and Lettrétage for their hospitality and assistance.

You can find photos and links with more information about Therese Giehse in our episode notes over at deadladyshow.com/podcast and on social media @deadladiesshow

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The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire.

The podcast is created, produced and edited by me, Susan Stone.

Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon.

Thanks to everybody out there listening.

We'll be back again next month with another Fabulous Dead Lady.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)